

A Christian Perspective on Traditional Art and Art Education in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Art – particularly traditional Nigerian art – has been subject to profound controversy in contemporary Nigeria. The subject presently divides the culturalist/traditionalist schools of thought and modernist, westernised or Christianised ones. The first strongly advocate the promotion of this industry and brandish it as a vector of cultural conservatism while the second (the modernist, westernized or Christianized Nigerians) view traditional art as a site of paganism, barbarism and spiritual impurity. In tandem with this, the different Christian vitalities have dogmatically held divergent views on (traditional) art. Using literary sources and a focus group discussion involving members of different Christian denominations, this paper attempts to demonstrate that Christian positions on the issue of traditional Nigerian art and art education are complex, personalised and very much conditioned by their respective or specific doctrinal orientations. Some Christians totally demonise traditional art while others advocate an intelligent return to sources in which relevant aspects of folk art are given a chance to express the Christian faith. This means that, to most pro-folk art Christians, ingredients such as traditional African music could be used to praise God and evangelize, the same as some sculpted forms could be used (like in some Catholic traditions) to express faith. The findings of this paper equally reveal that whatsoever the doctrinal orientation of Christians, art education is deemed important.

Keywords: African Traditional Art, Fundamental Christianity, Art Education, Conservatism

INTRODUCTION

Art in the contemporary Nigerian society has been approached from various perspectives. Cultural anthropologists, sociologists, artistes, politicians and simple observers among others have, in different forums, discussed the topic according to varied and often concurrent philosophical frameworks. A good number of Nigerian critics with a pride for national cultures have lamented over the moribund state of the art industry in Nigeria, advocating for a prompt revival of the sector (Onobrakpeya 2010, p.16; Yemisi 2013, p.63; Enamhe 2013, p.39; Abiodun 2003, p.17; Uzoagba 1982, pp.4-5). Though praising a number of art-friendly efforts by both private stakeholders and the Nigerian government, these observers/critics stress the critical state of the art industry in Nigeria attributing such a situation to a panoply of variables. In Yemisi's (2013) seemingly pessimistic appraisal, "the perception of art in Nigeria is very poor, in spite of the progress made in art appreciation in the last years". The industry is actually "trapped in the darkling corridors of underdevelopment" (p.18).

One of the variables responsible for this deplorable state of the Nigerian art industry is religion, precisely the religious fanaticism demonstrated by adepts of the various charismatic and Pentecostal movements mushrooming in Nigeria. In effect, many critics have decried the "relatively unjustified" hostility manifested by most charismatic and Pentecostal denominations towards art, especially Nigerian folk art.

Onobrakpeya (2010) for instance laments the fact that the new charismatic churches, with their ever increasing population of pertinacious and fundamentalist adepts, have pooh-poohed the idea of using art, particularly those inspired by the traditional motifs and symbols.

Their fundamentalist stance has caused them to embark on very aggressive campaigns against Nigerian folk art. In the cause, some sculptures in public squares have been condemned as fetish and destroyed. Onobrakpeya however nuances his position by contending that these draws backs do not totally mean that the Christian religion is, in all its facets, categorical opposed to folk art industry. It seems, only doctrinaire Christianity is inimical to Nigerian folk art, in

the country. In concert with this balanced position, Eze (2010) succinctly notes that:

Art plays an important role in the religious worship of some Christian churches. Art produces the images, symbols and visual illustrations which are used for teaching and preaching in some Religion. One might say that where religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for Art to save the spirit of religion by recognizing the figurative value of the mythic symbols which the former would have us believe in their literal sense, and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an idol presentation. (p.112) Many sociologists and anthropologists have branded Nigeria a very religious society. Indeed, Nigeria is a society wherein religion has permeated all facets of human life so much so that it is through the lenses of religion that sensitive phenomena in the political, social and economic spheres are seen and interpreted, despite the fact that secularism is – visibly only on paper – proffered/professed by the country's Constitution. This is not too surprising as religion has traditionally been a complex prism through which sociological phenomena – notably the art – are interpreted in most Black African societies. It is against this backdrop that the present discourse attempts a religious perspective on (traditional Nigerian) art and arts education in Nigeria. Based on both primary and secondary data (collected through a focus group discussion and literary sources), it presents Nigerian Christians' perceptions of art and arts education as well as the position(s) of various voices within the Christian religion on the role (Nigerian folk) art can play in the economic and human development or underdevelopment of the Nigerian nation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion and Art

As earlier mentioned, religion has so permeated all facets of human life in Nigeria that it is viewed as an inevitable prism through which all societal phenomena, including the arts are interpreted. Being defined by Radcliffe-Brown as “an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on a power outside ourselves, a power which we may speak of as a spiritual or moral power”, religion provides illumination to events affecting human life as well as gives a direction to the religious man's activities in all domains of life. In line with this, religion has affected or inspired particular artists or critics in their philosophy of arts and/or of

life. The link between religion and arts can therefore be viewed in the fact that the latter is often a site of the former's expression. In other words, religion is often complexly expressed in an artistic mode. A good illustration of this fact can be found in most primitive cultures wherein deities and other abstract religious entities were – or are – often represented in graven images, or sculptured forms, craftily conceived for worship, miscellaneous religious activities or simple decoration.

In effect, history reveals that the ancestors of most African ethnic groups produced objects especially sculptural forms in metal, wood, terracotta, stones, ivory and the like which they ultimately used not only for utility but equally for religious worship and the their development as ethnic groups. With close reference to some Nigerian ethnic groups, Eze (2010) insightfully notes that: there has always been a symbiosis between art, religion and the development of Nigerian ethnic groups. The three phenomena (art, religion and development) were inseparable one from the others. They have been complimenting each other and keeping the traditional society going and alive. Eze therefore notes that a good number of Nigerian traditional ethnic groups actually practiced art and religion in order to communicate with their gods. This was in line with their belief that the human soul and spirit are ever at work. As Eze further explains, “some of these gods were worshipped in shrines with art objects”. This kept these “primitive” Nigerian societies so much “intact and developed” (Eze 2010, p.113). In the same line of argument, Ademakinwa (2007) opines that:

The religious art works are those identifiable with particular shrines and deities. The paraphernalia of each shrines and its god can be differentiated from other sets of artifacts. Included here are the objects of deities in different forms. The traditional Igbo society, for instance has craftsmen who work under the spirit force, *Agwunshi* (traditional deity of creativity) to produce wood carvings for use in shrines for religious worship and the spiritual development of the society. (p. 14)

All these are evidences that for most African ethnic groups, it is impossible to dissociate religion from art. This perceived impossible dissociation of traditional African religion with arts is perhaps one of the motives that caused some of the early religious (missionary) bodies in Africa to confuse arts and culture with

paganism and other sinful practices. These religious bodies launched crusades which ended up orchestrating the somehow regrettable destruction of valuable arts works (Amadi 2005, p. 7; XXX 2014, pp. 3-4). They destroyed shrines and other important art works in the name of evangelization and spiritual renaissance. Valuable art objects that could provide peep-holes into the historical past of many African tribes were wantonly demonized, banned and utterly destroyed in the name of purification.

Christianity and Art in Modern Nigeria

Christians' attitudes towards arts in Nigeria have varied basically depending on denominations and appreciation of specific aspects of indigenous art. Though it is documented that some Christian denominations (Historical churches) such the Catholic church have contributed – in contemporary times and in no small measure – to the survival and promotion of art in the country, there is an overwhelmingly negative attitude by Christians – especially the new Christian churches – towards art in the country. Onobrakpeya (2010) underscores some of the art-friendly efforts of specific religion bodies, when he concedes that:

Religion has always had immense contribution to the development of art in any given age. It has done the same for Nigeria within the last 50 years. [The] Christian religion is on the lead. St Paul Catholic Church in Ebute Meta for instance, is like a museum. Sculptures (mainly carvings) by Fakeye, Osifo, Otoro and the paintings of the Stations of the Cross by this writer Bruce Onobrakpeya, draw visitors. The stained glass decoration by Yusuf Grillo and David Dale¹ are attractions in many of the churches. Demas Nwoko developed Nigerian architectural style which he has used to build the Dominican monastery in Ewu, Delta State². (p.91)

This notwithstanding, Christians have put forth multiple forms of resistance and counter advocacy against art, particularly traditional Nigerian art. Such anti-art movements are backed by an impressive number of biblical

¹Fakeye, Osifo and Otoro are famous Nigerian sculptors while Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo and Dele David are renowned artists within the domain of painting.

²Ebute Meta and Ewu are two localities in Nigeria. Delta is one of the States that constitute the Nigerian Federation.

injunctions – which sometimes are arguable or questionable interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. Based on such an appraisal, Yemisi (2013) refers to such anti-folk art movements as acts of “misinformed religious jingoists” (p.92). Some of the biblical references on which Christian revivalists hinge include Exodus 20:4, Romans 1:21, and the like, which explicitly or implicitly forbid them (Christians) from engineering graven images of God or any pictorial representation of the God's incorruptible glory. Other anti-art tendencies are grounded on biblical injunctions against idol worship. Therefore, to many Christians, art objects (especially traditional art), are vectors and symbols of paganism and instruments of spiriticism. Bisina and Henah (2013) castigate this more or less viral tendency of associating art with sin in their observation that, to most Christian Nigerians, “a piece of African art is a piece of *juju* wood or a bronze object which Europeans only admire out of curiosity [...] They see traditional African music as a cacophony of barbarous pagan noise; and traditional African drama or dance are erroneously perceived as nothing more than forms of incoherent or grotesque pagan display” (p.22).

In the same line or argument, Yemisi (2013) deplores the fact that this “suffocating” and indefinable religious revivalism and fanaticism have systematically neutralized the liberal spirit that art so much needs to propel in the country. He further illustrates his position by insightfully underscoring the numerous incidences of “conversions” of committed Nigerian artist to evangelists. He succinctly notes that:

A good number of artists have been lost to religious fanaticism and art as a whole is being impeded by much fanaticism in terms of the dwindling perspicacity of its vision and subject matters. As we know, overbearing religiousness presupposes orthodoxy, which is one of the greatest enemies of art. [...] Indeed, this exhibition of religious overzealousness by fundamentalists is not an isolated case in Nigeria and therefore we must cry loud against those perpetrating their ignorance in this sense. (Yemisi 2013, p. 82)

A notable and deplorable fact is that, by staunchly combating African traditional art in the guise of spiritual purism, these relatively “misinformed” Christian movements inadvertently pave the way for the systematic supplanting of the core Nigerian values and the firm implantation

of the Western cultures. No doubt Christianity and the Nigerian society are increasingly westernized, through the uncontrolled religious fanaticism and a mix of other socio-cultural factors (XXXX 2015, p. 3). As clearly shown above, charismatic Christian churches' dogmatism in combating traditional African art in particular has profoundly puzzled the culturalists and upset the animist observers. While the animists have most often hinged on such a dogmatism to make a sceptical appraisal of Christianity (XXX 2014), religious culturalists have often wonder why it seems so difficult for Pentecostal and charismatic churches to see a possible compatibility between the Christian faith and traditional African art in particular and traditional religion in general.

In tandem with this, Adegbembo laments over the fact that doctrinaire Christianity has made it extremely difficult if not impossible to promote not only folk art, but the totality of indigenous African Cultural heritage in Nigeria. As he pungently observes, there is actually no area of the African cultural heritage that has escaped the onslaughts of westernized versions of Christianity, though traditional religion and folk art have endured more bashing than the other aspects of traditional cultural practices. "Simply put, it can seem like these deep-rooted traditions and organized religions cannot exist side by side. But they can exist side by side! It depends on context and requires a *spin!*" (Adegbembo 2015, para2).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a focus group discussion involving a total of 14 Christians (Church elders and devoted adepts) evenly drawn from seven different religious denominations including Redeem Christian Church, Deeper Life Bible Church, Living Faith Church, Apostolic Church, Presbyterian Church and Anglican church. Seven (7) out of the 14 discussants were female. The focus group discussion aimed at eliciting discussants' perceptions of traditional art and art education in Nigeria. It was principally based on the five following questions:

- As Christians, what are your perceptions of art – particularly folk art – in Nigeria?
- How will you assess its impact on national development?
- Do you really think traditional Nigerian art is a threat to practicing Christianity?

- Do you think (traditional) art is a vector of moral corruption in Nigeria?
- Do you see a link between religious crusade against traditional Nigerian art and Western cultural imperialism or westernization?
- Do you think art education has its place in school curriculums in Nigerian?

To facilitate proper exchanges among the discussants and ensure the formulation of relevant responses, the above mentioned questions were, when need arose, reformulated and explained in various ways and circumstantially complemented by relevant follow up questions. Discussants' responses were recorded, and later analysed. The findings derived from the whole exercise are presented in the section that follows.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section of our paper provides a critical analysis of the findings derived from the focus group discussion. The discussants mainly expressed individualised perceptions of art. However, *grosso modo*, they viewed art as a communication whose contents and form depend mainly on the author (the artist) and the inspiration source (God or Satan). In tandem with this, most of the discussants described art as a site of the expression of good and evil, an instrument which, though originally very transparent and neutral, could become a "weapon" in the hands of Satan to achieved unwelcomed targets. These observations indisputably hinge on the inspiration theory which stipulates that works of art are inspired either by God or by Satan. In line with this, it could be argued that the artist is just an instrument in the hands of either God or Satan to implement specific designs in the universe, the world.

Most (11) of the discussants therefore associated good art with works which not only have aesthetical qualities but which are inspired by "spiritually pure" sources and which promote a philosophy relevant to human existence on earth, spiritual progress and economical flourishing. In line with this, one of the discussants enthused that "To an extent, God could be considered the first artist. His astonishing talent and wisdom are revealed in the way He artfully fashioned the world, the birds, the humans, the flora. Everything He made is said to be beautiful and appealing not

only to the senses but also to reason and necessity [...] Art is therefore worthy of praise in so far as it directly or indirectly translates the philosophy of God our creator. This philosophy is life, truth and positive living [...] Art should actually moralize otherwise it is not relevant". This conception of art and Christianity (Christian doctrines) could be contrasted with a number of postmodern and more or less secular conceptions and imaginations. An egregious example is Tozer's (2008) observation that:

Good art must not be equated with *moral* art [...] Art is good when it effectively communicates. It may communicate something immoral, but morality is not the issue. Communication, empathy is the issue. In this sense, it's better not to use the words "good" or "bad" in reference to art. I think that the better word is "effective." this word carries the sense of function apart from morality. [...] Just because art portrays immorality does not make it immoral. The thing to consider is how the consumer of art is asked to respond [...] When we are evaluating art, the quality of that art should be based not on its morality, but on how effectively it communicates. Your taste for consuming should be based on its morality. (p.34)

Some of the discussants similarly departed from the essentially "moralist" and "purist" theorisation of art. They stressed the importance and centrality of aesthetic in art. In line with this, some of the discussants observed that giving the fact that aesthetic is the overriding quality of the art, it is important that the appreciation of art – even by the religious observers – avoid the over spiritualisation of good artistry. One of such discussants succinctly opined that "art is first of all beauty, whether it is for the glory of God or not. What we (Christians) should do is to also consider the fact that other religious currents and philosophies have their conception of art, beauty and usefulness of art. We cannot [attempt to] universalize a subjective construction of art in the name of religion!".

Discussants' reactions on the question of traditional Nigerian arts and Christianity were also marked by serious oppositions – particularly between members of the Historic churches and those of other (Pentecostal) denominations and charismatic groups. Most (over 8) discussants from the non-historic churches attacked traditional Nigerian art, particularly such phenomena as artistic artefacts associated with traditional religion. Some of the discussants utterly demonised sculpted forms and musical

expressions associated with the worship of indigenous deities. These schools of thought associated such a type of artistic expression to spiritual barrenness and Satanism. One of them noted that "my position may be viewed as fundamentalist but I want us to be mindful of the fact that there are only two ways: good and bad; God and Satan and truth and falsehood. There is no third way. If a work of art does not originate from God – and here I mean the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [the God of Christian], it is of an unclean source and author. Folk art is not actually of a Christian source which therefore means that it is of Satan". Such a position seemingly dissociates folk art from a divine working and so brands it as a force unarguably antithetical to Christianity. The position also illustrates the Unique Master Theory which is a perspective often exploited by fundamentalist Christian in art appreciation. According to this theory, a Christian (artist) is a vessel in the hands of God alone. He cannot serve two masters (the World and God) and be positively rewarded by his Master. This is in accordance with Luke 16:13 in which the Lord Jesus exhorts saying "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. *Ye* cannot serve God and mammon".

However, some (over 5) of the discussants – particularly members of the Historic churches – insisted on making nuanced appraisal of the thesis of the non-Christian nature of traditional folk art. According to such discussants, Christianity could find relevant artefacts in Nigerian folk art, even to support some of its claims and to evangelise rural or Africanist (Afro-centric) masses. One of them noted that "It is not wise to hasten and relegate traditional African art to an abominable sin. I think some aspects of it could be relevant to some of our evangelical and salvific projects. Not all of Nigerian folk culture or traditional art is devoid of good values or devoted to ancestral worship. On the basis of this premise, I can argue that not all of traditional art is satanic as most of us fundamentalist tend to believe". Discussants who manifested pro-folk art sentiments supported the use of relevant aspects of traditional Nigerian art such as fashion design, music and the like to indigenise ways of practicing, packaging and advertising the Christian faith in Nigeria.

Another important finding of the focus group discussion is that the discussants unanimously

supported the teaching of art in Nigerian primary schools as they viewed art as a field that may offer jobs opportunities to Nigerians including Christians. However, most (12) of them reiterated the duality of art; that is the possibility that it could serve genuine or spiritually harmful purposes, based on the spiritual orientation and source of inspiration of the artist. Based on this, some (about 7) of them strongly recommended that the content of programs in art education be shaped according to some moral principles and philosophy which will be in line with Christianity. In tandem with this, a discussant enthused that “our children will not be effectively modelled in terms of morals if they are made to give attention to aspects of art that will derail them from the Christian faith”.

CONCLUSION

Art – particularly the morality of traditional Nigerian art – as a phenomenon in contemporary Nigerian society has been subject to serious controversy. The debate over the phenomenon actually divides the culturalist – who advocate the promotion of this industry – and the modernist, sometimes westernized or Christianized Nigerians who rather view traditional art as a site of paganism, and spiritual impurity. Christians have similarly held different views on art. This discourse has attempted to demonstrate that Christian positions on the issue are personalised and are very much determined by their respective or specific doctrinal orientations. Some totally demonise traditional art while others advocate an intelligent return to sources in which relevant aspects of folk art are given a chance to express the Christian faith. This means that, to the pro-folk art Christian (majority of which are of the historic churches), elements such as traditional African music could be used to praise God and evangelize, the same as some sculpted forms could be used (like in some Catholic traditions) to express faith. This paper has also shown that whatsoever the doctrinal orientation of Christian, art education is deemed important and susceptible to create employment opportunities even for Christians.

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